

The Story Behind "Tips on Writing"

(The following article by Nancy Anne Dawe was taken from the Oct. 18 issue of *The Brockton Sunday Enterprise*.)

When John Henry Cutler tilts back in his office chair, you hope he's going to talk about writing.

Founder and publisher of the weekly newspaper, the *Duxbury Clipper*, he's also been a syndicated columnist, and authored 10 books. Included are biographies of Boston's late Cardinal Cushing, Mayor "Honey-Fitz," former Senator Ed Brooke, and James Michael Curley's ghost written autobiography -- making him perhaps the most knowledgeable living chronicler of the political history of Boston and Massachusetts.

Cutler's love affair with language, which first took form at 15 in "little profiles" he wrote of friends, continued through language and literature studies at Harvard, then 5 years teaching French and Spanish at Dartmouth. It further flourished during World War II, while editing the Navy's South Atlantic News in Recife, Brazil, and later flying all over the Pacific theater as Admiral Aubrey Fitch's "eyes, ears and speechwriter."

Although Cutler's fascination with composition led to the establishment in 1950 of the *Duxbury Clipper* -- his writing lifeblood -- there would also be time for other intriguing assignments. He not only "underwrote" and edited *Face of Justice*, the smuggled-from-prison book of convicted murderer, Caryl Chessman, in 1963, but expanded the smuggled text of a Chinese author's *Secret Diary From Red China*, named one of the best 100 books of 1961.

Cutler's romance with syntax has lately come full circle, as he shares with others some accumulated writing wisdom. "I decided that the one book I always wanted to write was a simple one on writing itself, that would teach a person to avoid the most common errors I've observed through 30 years of *Clipper* editing."

His recently-published *Tips on Writing*, "A Sound, Engaging Guide to Writing," is a sprightly, inexpensive little paperback written in collaboration with his friend and onetime editor, Monroe Stearns. A New Yorker whom Cutler met in 1948 at the Breadloaf Writers' Conference, Stearns has equally impressive credentials; once chief editor of publishers Bobbs Merrill and Prentice Hall, writing teacher at school and college levels, and author of 32 books of his own, including some translations.

They conceived *Tips on Writing* "as a guide for writers by writers," whether those writers are junior high, high school, or college students, businessmen, neophyte or professional scribes; anyone, in fact, who wants to produce "literate, accurate communications in such everyday and universal requirements as a school theme, a personal or business letter, an inter-office memorandum, a business report, a news release or a prepared speech."

"It's the type of book I wish I'd had when I started writing 40 years ago," says Cutler. "It would have saved me so many embarrassments -- criticisms from

editors, some really sloppy writing. I wrote my first column for the old Boston Transcript, and when I read what was published compared to what I submitted, I was shocked. What did the editors mean by changing my beautiful prose? Then I realized it was purple and pompous -- that I'd just been showing off.

"What we wanted to do with this book -- or handbook, really, for it fits in your pocket -- was teach concision. You can be concise in a volume and diffuse in a line."

Cutler first thought of the book 18 years ago while addressing 50 Plymouth County teachers of English at Hingham High School. "I had written a great many magazine articles for *Esquire*, *Colliers*, and other publications, and told the group how I'd written the pieces, giving some of my writing ideas." Surprised when the teachers asked him what he meant by putting an adjective in a noun, and an adverb in a verb, he explained: "If you want to say a person is worthless, good-for-nothing, don't use several words, use 'oaf.' Don't say, 'he swayed from side to side,' say, 'he staggered.'"

"But I wondered, 'Why wouldn't they know that?'"

Cutler then read an article in Harper's entitled "Why Johnny Can't Write Good," which said one reason was the use of multiple choice tests. "My generation, on the other hand, had to write essays, which is the basis for all good writing. Also, students notoriously can't write usually because their teachers can't write. Not because they're not intelligent -- but because they haven't been taught, either. I wasn't a good writer, even after graduating from Harvard with my Bachelor's, Masters, and PhD degrees!"

Along with these events, while editing the *Clipper*, Cutler was noticing a consistent pattern of mistakes -- redundancy, over-use of the passive voice, mixed metaphors. So he wrote a series of discursive essays on writing for his paper that elicited so much comment, they became the book's foundation. "I subsequently sent the material to Stearns -- a masterful organizer and better editor than I -- who completely revamped it, adding a great deal more."

"Our book is an adjunct to other books on writing and isn't expected to take the place of a grammar. It's a sort of short cut to good writing; not a reference book, but a series of practical suggestions on how to improve in a hour or 2." Although its 81 pages -- with chapters on Words, The Correct Use of Words, Sentences, Paragraphs, Style, Composition, Usage, and Punctuation and Capitalization -- are packed with facts, "it has light touches, too, rather than being one of those grammars that dulls the senses."

There is sheer hilarity in some samples of misplaced modifiers:

"FOR SALE: Piano oy lady going to Europe with

carved legs."

"Meals are prepared under the supervision of a dietician packaged in a disposable styrofoam container."

"FOR SALE: St. Bernard. Will eat anything, fond of children."

Published on the *Clipper* presses, *Tips on Writing* is available at the *Clipper*, at Duxbury, Kingston and Hingham bookstores, will soon be distributed throughout the South Shore, and is advertised nationally in writing publications. It received kudos from educators and writers alike, including Alison Arnold, former society editor of the *Boston Herald* and *Boston Globe*. "It's so simply written, all ages can understand it," she says.

But before it was even off the press, the advertising manager of a metropolitan newspaper dropped into the *Clipper* office to ask where he could get a copy. Cutler was obviously pleased. "I'm not boasting," he says, "when I say this book is helpful."